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NP Comment

Derek H. Burney: Joe Biden's pipeline hypocrisy demands a Canadian reality check

We need to adapt existing Canadian pipelines to bypass the U.S. and secure our own destiny on energy

Derek H. Burney

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U.S. President Joe Biden attends a NATO summit in Brussels on June 14, 2021. PHOTO BY KENZO TRIBOUILLARD/POOL/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

This is a tale of three pipelines — Keystone XL (from Western Canada to the U.S. Gulf Coast), Nord Stream 2 (from Russia to Germany) and Enbridge Line 5 (from Wisconsin through the Straits of Mackinac to Sarnia, Ont). The common ingredient in all three is Joe Biden. As one of his first official acts, the U.S. president vetoed Keystone XL, ignoring evidence of significant GHG reductions that have occurred since the pipeline was first overturned by president Barack Obama in 2015. It was reinstated by Donald Trump in 2017. Ottawa has taken no action to counter Biden's decision. After all, it is of prime interest to parts of Western Canada, where Liberal MPs are scarcer than hen's teeth. Subjected to arbitrary discrimination by the American administration and abject neglect by its own government, TC Energy decided last week to terminate the project.

On Nord Stream 2, Biden had fought to block the pipeline but relented out of respect for his close ally, Germany, and declined to impose sanctions proposed by Congress against the builder. There are understandable concerns in his administration that reliance on Russian supplies of natural gas poses a threat to Germany's national security and beyond. The European parliament called for the pipeline to be stopped.

Do the Germans not have any responsibility for damaging relations with Washington and many in Europe while giving Russian President Vladimir Putin a significant economic reward? Countries like Poland, which are significantly less wealthy than Germany, are willing to pay a premium to avoid Russian gas. As a Wall Street Journal editorial concluded, “He (Biden) is treating a pipeline that increases Russian influence and income better than one that enhances America’s.”

Ottawa has taken no action to counter Biden’s decision

Enbridge’s Line 5 transports 540,000 barrels of light crude and natural gas liquids daily to provide roughly half of Ontario and Quebec’s fuel supply. Some is refined and then re-exported to heat homes in Upper Michigan. It also provides 55 per cent of Michigan’s propane needs after being refined in the state. Following the 2010 Enbridge Line 6B spill into Michigan’s Kalamazoo River, which cost the company \$1.2 billion in fines and cleanup fees, Enbridge received approval to replace the underwater portion of Line 5 with a cement-enclosed pipeline to prevent future leaks, but Gretchen Whitmer’s election as Michigan governor in 2019 put a stop to that plan.



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In a determined effort to bolster support among progressive Democrats, Whitmer, who reportedly has presidential ambitions, declared that she would cancel the easement for the pipeline. The dispute is now before the courts, and Ottawa has filed an amicus curiae brief in support of keeping Line 5 open.

Despite the fact that the governor’s action would contradict a 1977 treaty that explicitly guarantees the uninterrupted flow of oil in existing pipelines involving our two countries, a treaty that Biden, as a Delaware senator, voted to ratify, the Biden administration has avoided direct engagement on Line 5. Biden has remained mum and Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm, who earlier served as governor of Michigan, has explicitly chosen not to weigh in. “It is in court right now ... It will be decided in court.” She did acknowledge candidly that pipelines are the safest, most efficient means to transport fossil fuels.



Miles of unused pipe, prepared for the Keystone XL pipeline, sit in a lot on October 14, 2014 outside Gascoyne, North Dakota.

Miles of unused pipe, prepared for the Keystone XL pipeline, sit in a lot outside Gascoyne, N.D., in a file photo from 2014. TC Energy confirmed on June 9, 2021, that the pipeline project is officially dead. PHOTO BY ANDREW BURTON/GETTY IMAGES FILES

Given the importance of Line 5 to vote-rich Ontario and Quebec, Natural Resources Minister Seamus O'Regan not surprisingly declared that Canada's support was "non-negotiable," reminiscent of Stephen Harper's claim that Keystone was a "no-brainer." But why have we not pressed President Biden to intervene?

If the governor of Michigan succeeds in her gambit to block Line 5, it may be a sufficient reality check for Canadians to conclude that "good fences" may make "good neighbours" but pipelines do not. Instead, we need to adapt existing Canadian pipelines to our own needs and secure our own destiny on energy.

One practical solution would be an agreement to keep Line 5 open pending the creation of a Canadian Shield pipeline system that would bypass Michigan and the United States altogether by converting a portion of TC Energy's existing mainline from natural gas to oil and connecting it to the existing Enbridge Line 9 pipeline along the St. Lawrence River. The oil could flow northeast to serve Quebec's refineries and southwest to Ontario's refineries. It would also allow time for Midwest U.S. refineries and Michigan consumers to find alternate sources of crude oil and propane.

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Using existing pipelines would generate no additional GHG emissions as they would simply replace the supply now transported via Line 5. It would, however, require unfettered support from Ottawa as the current regulatory regime would stifle any significant pipeline activity.

Alternatively, oil could be transshipped via the St. Lawrence Seaway to Saint John, enabling exports to Asia.

Why the difference between the two Canadian pipelines and the one from Russia to Germany? Hypocrisy is certainly a factor. Clearly, some allies are more important than others in the grand scheme of foreign policy and national security. Even though Canada is America's neighbour, largest trading partner and an alliance partner long before Germany joined the fold, our interests do not count for much in today's Washington. Canadian pipelines are expendable.

Our interests do not count for much in today's Washington

Despite all the brave talk in Ottawa that the election of Joe Biden would initiate a new era of co-operation between the North American neighbours, the rhetoric is running well ahead of the deeds.

Whether on pipelines, emerging trade disputes on softwood lumber and dairy, or the never-ending "Two Michaels/Madame Meng" saga, the government has been meek and submissive in dealing with Washington. Canada has been taken for granted, treated cavalierly and regarded by many, especially some in Asia, as a hapless, American patsy. Notwithstanding the bonhomie and soothing rhetoric on shared woke sentiments, we are discovering that American leaders will exploit weakness and play hardball when it suits their political interests. Geography may oblige us to be neighbours but it is no guarantee of special consideration. We are not really on Biden's radar. It is time to put childish nostrums about neighbours and kindred, "progressive" spirits aside.

We should act decisively in our own self-interest.

Derek H. Burney was Chief of Staff to the Right Honourable Brian Mulroney from 1987-1989 and Ambassador to the United States of America from 1989-1993.

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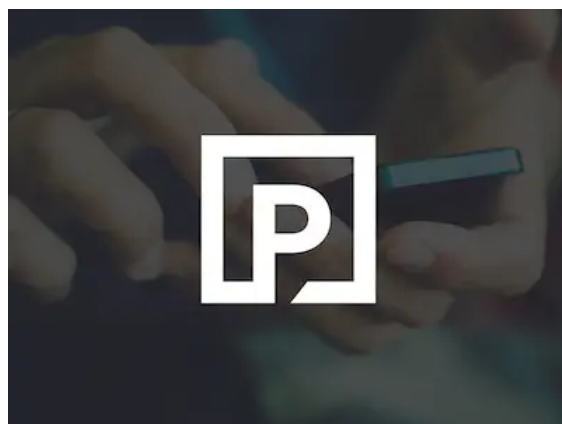
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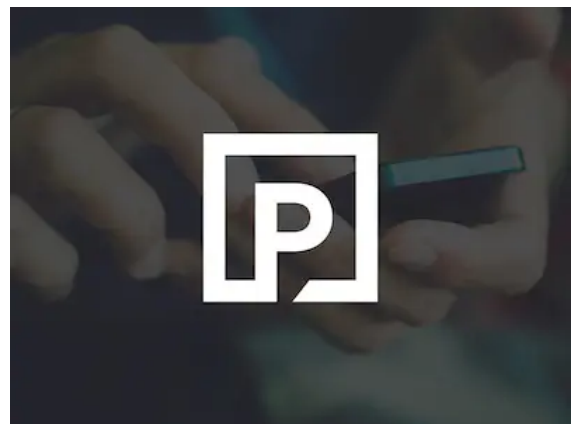
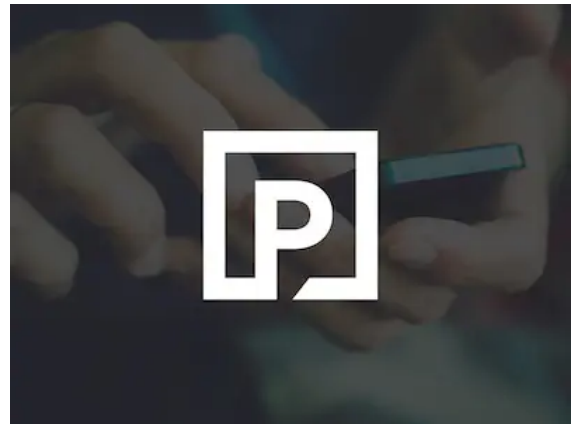
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